

## BESIDE THE STILE.

BY LOUISE BARTON.

IT was the fairest spot in all the country side, that stile, overtopped by wild rose boughs, and standing as it did in a green nook between the dusky wood and the broad rounded stretch of upland meadow which, in front and to the left, appeared to overhang the sea. To the right a gorge stooped suddenly far down to a mill stream and a purple moor beyond. There gloomed the gray walls of a castle, and farther seaward rose the spire and roofs of a prosperous fishing village. Where the stream fell down toward the sea in foaming falls, a mill-tower started up among rocks of which it seemed a part. To the left, at the wood's verge, a pecked and gabled red-roofed farm-house clustered, with full fields and cackling, bustling barn-yard, among branching oaks.

Over the sea the sunset flush of dusky red slanted across the upland, and lit up a lingering group of haymakers, still raking up in stacks the new-mown hay. The evening breeze came laden with the balmy scent here to the stile, where leaned a man still young, though passed beyond the first years of his manhood. There was a weariness in the gray eyes that roved from moor to gorge and upland, a restless dissatisfaction, though the whole fair country side, far as his glance could reach, was his. Mill and farm-house, field and wood, belonged to yonder castle, and he was looking on them all for the first time since boyhood passed among them. The memories that dwelt here were all peaceful as this gloaming nook, where only the breeze fluttered, and the nestling birds were twittering, while distant waves washed nearer in the hush. Now and again a laugh rang from the hay field, or the black kine lowed, and a bell tinkled in the woodland pasture to which this stile led. But these sounds did not break on the serenity. That which troubled it was in Kenneth Macgregor's self, as he thought of the boyish hopes with which he had leaned there last, and how their brightness had withered in his hold like fairy gold, which in the light of day fades to a heap of yellow leaves.

Macgregor was no misanthrope who falls to idle hatred of the world because he is worsted in the first brush with it. He had stood up manfully in his place, but had been worsted, nevertheless. He began the battle with fair-seeming weapons of hope, rank, money, friends, and an untarnished name. The last a brother had flung down and trodden in the mire, and the first had slipped from his own grasp. Rank, money, friends; the first two might have kept the last, but he scorned to hold them so, and recklessly threw them aside, when perhaps they might have proved trusty and true. And then he had retreated here, at bay, though

disdaining to keep the field with such ignoble weapons as remained to him.

Slander had whispered that he was a treacherous friend, a coward, murderer. Slander could not prove that whisper, but Macgregor could not disprove it, save by pointing to his only brother, "thou art the man." And so he bore the calumny in silence, after the first vehement denial. That silence was hard when the guilty one sneaked cowardly away in the crowd that turned the cold shoulder to him. But, having once closed his lips, Macgregor was not to be bullied nor exasperated into speaking. For a time he stood his ground in his London world, and then came seeking rest, not flight, to his hereditary home.

Here were at least no eyes to meet him on a level, taunting him with the dark story. The old tacksman, or hereditary tenant, in the farm-house yonder, the villagers and peasants round—although they doubtless knew that story, and believed it, yet remembered their allegiance to the laird, and, when he met them, greeted him respectfully. And there was certainly some sense of rest in the calm gloaming—some soft soothing in the breeze to which he bared his brow. Yet his lips parted with a heavy sigh, when just at that moment he heard a rustic close behind him in the grassy path that wound out from the pasture.

He turned quickly. They were the blue folds of a kirtle that had brushed against him, and a young girl paused there waiting to cross the stile. One dimpled arm steadied the full milking-pail upon her head, and with the other she had parted the rose boughs, and so came suddenly upon him. The red sun flushed the white kerchief crossed upon her bosom and her throat as white, and glanced and glittered in her braided, snooded hair, as if it left the darkening skies to shine in golden glory there. Macgregor gazed, forgetting to move, and then he stood aside to let her pass.

He had made a motion as if to help her over the stile, but his arm fell as he remembered there were few women of his own rank to whom he would venture to offer it. The lassie had her foot still upon the lower step, and saw and understood his motion. She stopped, half turned, and blushingly held out her hand, raising her eyes as she did so full to his. Their frank blue glance told him as plainly as words could have done that he was recognized, and, as he helped her over in silence, her hand rested on his with that unshrinking touch which he felt could never have been had she believed his stained with crime.

It was but a second, and she had passed from him, tripping lightly over the brown stubble and the scented clover with a smile for this gleaner, and a merry word for that. Macgregor watched her until she disappeared among the oaks that skirted the farm-yard. So, then, she

could be no other than the tacksman's granddaughter, his little foster-sister, whom he had left a plaything of four years old. He turned away when she was lost to sight, and went down to his lonely castle with a lighter heart than he had borne for many months. It was something to be believed in by one innocent soul.

Macgregor pushed away his book, where the sunbeams, dancing in and out through shadows of the shifting leaves overhead, were making strange blurs of the closely-printed text. He flung his arm above his head, and stretched himself at length upon the mossy crag which overhung the mill stream, and was shut in by the low sweeping alders and the silvery stems of a birken copse. A snowy heifer was browsing in the sedges yonder sleepily. The hum of the mill-wheel at a distance died away hardly louder than that of the bee burrowing in the yellow primrose, which leaned here against the brimming wave. The balmy noon tide was a time to dream, not read. So Macgregor lounged there idly, watching through half-shut lids the sparkles flashing in and out among the ripples. Strangely enough, as he watched, ripples and sparkles wove a braid of sunny hair, from the contemplation of which he was hardly roused by a low distant singing. It came from a hazel copse that hid the path down from the upland, but presently the singer emerged. Who but Annot—not this time with her milking-pail, but carrying perched on her shoulder a little rosy child, clinging and crowing gleefully as she sang to it, and filled its chubby hands with flowers. Down the crag among the wild roses she sprang, until the gray birks closed around and snatched her away like a dream.

Macgregor had been dreaming too deeply. He rose up with an impatient gesture, as if to shake himself awake. It was very pastoral and pretty, perhaps, this idyl of maids and milking-pails, but the shorter the idyl the wiser for him who was no pastor fidus. Annot had passed up the glen, and he would take the path which led down where the bridge crossed the floss above the mill. But first he turned for a last glance. She had passed out from the birks, and stood where her pet heifer moved to meet her through the sedges. She had lowered the child to the tame creature's shoulder, and the shrinking boy, growing bolder, reached over to feed the strange steed with his handful of blossoms. A bright little picture it was, as the heifer trampled through the tufted grass, the child clinging to its shaggy neck with one dimpled arm, while the other hand was fast in the young girl's hold. Macgregor found it difficult to turn away, and yet he did so. But hardly had he taken the first step, hardly had he lost that picture of joyousness, when a shriek pierced the tranquil air. Another—one stride brought him round the intercepting crag.

There stood Annot on the bank where the milk-white heifer lazily stooped her fringed brow to the stream. There stood Annot, but the child? A plunge, a few strong strokes, and Macgregor had grasped a limp, white burden floating on the floss.

But how the current strove for it, then grappled with him, while its gurgling round about him mocked his utmost efforts. And the wheel, the great white wheel, that revolved weirdly as that of fate before his dimmed eyes, seemed with every laboring, groaning turn to draw two life threads nearer to itself. Those seconds drew out to long hours, while the struggle was uncertain. But, at last, at last, the bank was gained; two girlish arms reached out to the spent swimmer, and, in the gladdest sunshine that ever fell on him, he laid his burden on her bosom.

She knelt there in the quivering rushes, trembling more than they. She pressed her warm cheek to the cold one laid so still against her, and from which she stroked away the washed-out curls. She looked in wild despair into the blue eyes, glassed as if life's tide stood still in them. But, while she looked, they brightened to her gaze, a faint flush stole across the baby cheek, and presently a tiny hand stole up and nestled on her neck. With that, she rose from her knee, and stood before Macgregor. Blue as April skies, her eyes shone through fast-dropping tears, while radiant smiles lit up her face.

"I canna thank you," she said, softly, "but God kens. He thanks his creatures best."

And she lifted the child in her arms up toward him. Macgregor glanced at her, then touched the soft closed baby mouth her lips had pressed but now.

"Surely the laird will come hame wi' us," she said; "the gude-sire wad be blithe and fain"—

But Macgregor would enter no door, not even his tenant's, on any footing save that of an innocent man. He said gayly that he must forthwith convey his dripping self back to the castle. So, smiling on him through her happy tears, she hastened on the path that mounted to the upland.

Through the twilight which closed that day he paced the castle terrace, where at every turn the upland met his gaze. Lights glinted through the trees on which the farm-house hid; and then one tiny lattice highest of all flashed out like an unattainable star. He watched till it went out, and then he passed on slowly, and entered to the gloom of his lonely hall.

Many a twilight had gone by, when one night Macgregor rode along the upland verge beside the stile. In that other gloaming, hill and valley were a-leaf—now, shrouded snow enwrapped them all. Toward the bared wood hung clouds which, though they hid the moon, did

not prevent its light from defining so much of the landscape as the fallen snow had not smoothed away in a waved surface. Above the ice-bound stream the mute mill-wheel hung, one glitter of icicles, when now and again the moon broke through its prison. Gray and bleak the sea stretched out, and black the pine wood on the moor's outer verge. All else was one cold white expanse.

But there was no cold for Macgregor. Color came to his bronzed cheek, light to his grave eyes, as he checked his horse beside the stile involuntarily, stopping as he looked back on the year, the sands of which had not an hour to run. It was a checkered way to look back on. The blackness of despair was uniform across its earlier parts; but since the summer, light and shadow alternated. The light—yes, it had come to this—the light was of the days when he had been with Annot; the shadows, those passed apart from her. Not a word of love had he yet spoken, hoping time might teach her what he feared to try to do too soon. Had it so taught? He could not tell—only her welcome was ever the most cordial of all the cordial welcomes at the hill-farm, where he was an honored guest. For slanders from the city had died away in "the Macgregor's ain kintra," like a whiff of noisome vapor in the fresh pure air. As for Annot—last week, when he walked with her from the kirk, recounting some narrow escape of his by sea, she paled and trembled, and her little hand touched his arm, moved by a quick impulse. Just there, however, the daft old gudesire had trudged up with his duty to the laird.

To-night, according to good Scottish custom, all the offshoots of the family from far and wide assembled in the farm-house to hail in the New Year. And when the clock should strike the knell of the Old Year, whoever set his foot first on the threshold, might claim a kiss from the lassie within, as her "First Foot," or Valentine. Macgregor had chosen this time to decide his fate yet further. He would lay it in Annot's hands, to do with it according to her will.

Gay Glamis sped across the snow, until the vane upon the byre glinted near, and beckoned, veering in the veering wind. Beneath a transient moonbeam, all the icy-armored oak-twigs twinkled in a flash of gold and red. But from the huge deep casement of the gabled house, a blaze of firelight was beckoning yet more brightly; and at its bidding Macgregor flung himself from his horse.

But he could not pass round to the entrance-porch at once. He had caught a glimpse within, and paused, hidden by curtaining ivy.

Well might he pause, for a brighter glimpse one could not have. The flames in the vast alcoved chimney leaped from wainscoted walls to polished oak beams overhead, and down again to the sanded floor. They just touched

in their way the towering clock upon the stroke of twelve, the brass-linked chest of drawers, white curtains looped back from the lattice, and the shining centre-table heaped with brown nuts and bannocks, and the reddiest of apples. There, too, gathered faces just as rosy, or as brown and wrinkled, as the homely cheer before them—met together to bind the tie of kindred close again with every renewed year. In the chimney-corner sat the grandame, with gray hair banded under snowy curch, her withered hand upon the curls of the prattling little one upon her knee. Opposite, the gudesire, his face like a frosted winter apple under his hoary pow, beat time with his stick to the chorus. But all this Macgregor hardly saw. For Annot knelt upon the hearth, the bairns about her, peeping while she frothed the wassail-bowl upon the embers, ready for the last stroke of the clock.

How fair she was—how graceful the lily-droop of the golden head—how sweet the smiling red lips which presently must pay the "First Foot's toll." Macgregor glanced at the clock opposite. One moment more—

A quick rap at the inner door. "Open, lassie, it maun be auld neighbor Miller," said the grandfather. But the children danced about in glee, clapping their hands, and shouting, "Annot's First Foot! Annot's First Foot tiring at the door-pin!"

Annot passed close by the casement. Macgregor saw how at the children's shout she flushed, then paled, and drew a deep though voiceless sigh. She lifted the latch slowly. And then the sighing lips parted in a thrilling cry:—

"Rob! Rob! come hame at last across the sea!"

Macgregor dropped the ivy boughs against the pane. For there upon the threshold Annot clung in the arms of a stripling sailor, her gold hair against his breast, her glowing face uplifted as his stooped to her. He staggered blindly from the lattice, the glad tones within taking away his very breath.

Only moments passed while he stood without beneath the oaks. But they were moments wherein gathered all the blackness of the bitter past—the blackness of the empty future. Yet he was calm when he entered the ben, and stood among the guests. "The Macgregor is pale wi' the frost-wind's skirling," they said, as they welcomed him.

He mingled with them, hailing in the New Year as if all the while he was not thinking of that dead year which had brought him—

"A friend and a true, true love,  
And the New Year will take them away."

Bonnie Annot held the wassail-bowl for him to pledge, and, as he bent his head, she murmured, bashfully, with downcast glance:—

"Macgregor maun pledge joy to Annot, for the New Year fills her cup to overflowing."

He grasped her hand, and drained the bowl

without a word. And then he drew her to the door apart, and there with down-dropped eyes she told her story.

"How well you listened, little Annot," he jested, shading his face from the light, "when all my talk was of the sea."

Her trilling laughter taunted him. "Eh, sirs, sic fearsome tales!" she cried. "You mind the day, laird, when you walked wi' me hame from the kirk? I tried to tell you all then; but it was no' that easy while Rob was still awa'. You maun ken it was at the stile where you and I first met, that we had parted—Rob and I—before you came back to the castle. We plighted troth mony a day ere that, but he—a-weel, I had danced wi' the miller's Tam—and when Rob chid I flouted him. That night a ship sailed from the village, and Rob sailed in her."

"And yet all this while she was so gay, so blithe," he said, very low, rather to himself than to her.

She looked up quickly. "Eh, would ye ha'e folk say I was breaking my heart for one who left me? 'Sae blithe!' Muckle men ken! Though what for suld I greet, when I never doubted of his coming back to me? For Rob loves me," and she lifted her head proudly.

Aye, Rob loves me! but no more than Annot loves, Macgregor saw, as the young sailor came up at that moment. Unobserved, Macgregor passed out from the doorway, and flung himself upon his horse.

The gathering storm had burst at last. The moon had set; the sky was hopelessly overclouded; fast and fast the flakes fell through the pressing dark. The blast drove from the sea, howling and rending the desolate wood like a crazed thing. Bravely and steadily Glamis dashed on, and his master fiercely welcomed the strife with the elements, as some relief from the dull pain that numbed his heart. But the winds swept about, flinging snow-wreaths against blinded eyes, mocking and baffling the floundering steed with treacherous drifts and shifting walls.

The path down to the moor was gone. Woods, gorge, and field, all blent together undefinedly. Once and again Macgregor turned, crossed and recrossed the upland, still uncertain of his course. The farm-house light went out among the trees; no ray fell through the low-hung clouds; no glimmer rose up from the moor.

Benumbed, bewildered, drowsy, with a heaviness from which he could not rouse. Macgregor's head sank on his breast. And now when Glamis plunged, and rose to take the wild-rose hedge, now but a ragged thorn-brake half buried in the snow, his master swerved in the saddle, dizzily caught at empty air, and fell prone to the ground against the heaped-up stile.

The night went on, and heaped the snow yet

when the New Year sun arose in skies of steely blue, it glinted on a drifted grave beside the stile.

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